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By J. F. SMITH,

Author of "Minnigrey," "Woman and Her Master," &c.



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AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

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accomplished—my country freed—my kindred blood avenged—swear that my father's pardon shall reward the deed."

"You tax me past my power," answered the bewildered Ulrick, astonished at the vehemence of her words and the deep passion which shook her soul; but if my prayers can win the boon, I promise it shall be yours."

"It can, it can," resumed the agitated Ethra, with a burst of tears which relieved her heart. "He will listen to thy pleading. If thou shouldst find him harsh, if the absolving words should linger on his lips, lead him," she added, "to my grave—paint to him my sorrows and remorse, my blighted years, life's withered hopes—bid him forget my sin in its atonement; then will the voice of nature speak within him, and his heart melt in precious, dear forgiveness."

There was something so desolate, so heart-broken and despairing in the speaker's voice, that the firm nature of the soldier melted at its tone. In the agitation of the moment her veil had partially fallen aside, displaying her still beautiful though care-worn features. Perhaps it may be wondered that he failed to recognise them; but ten years of womanhood and sorrow had so altered their expression from those of the wild, joyous girl his heart so long had mourned as with the dead, and the pale lamp's uncertain light so shadowed them, that the suspicion never crossed his brain. Had it, oh! with what eager love his arms would have enfolded his lost treasure—with what absolving tears his yearning heart pronounced forgiveness of her crime, oblivion of the past! But it was not to be; the sacrifice to conscience was voluntary and accepted.

"Live," he exclaimed, "to hear the pardon thy repentance merits from a parent's lips; to feel once more the joy of his paternal kiss; to rest thy heart, after life's storms and shipwrecks, in the calm haven of a father's love."

"Never," said his daughter, with an expression of resolution, amounting almost to sternness, upon her brow; "my heart would wither should I see the blush of shame suffuse my father's cheek if men but named his child. Thinkst thou I could bear the world's forgiveness, or, far more hateful, its insulting pity? No," she added, "my life hath been the comet's fearful path—my death be like its end. Time presses: in my father's name, pronounce a blessing and forgiveness on me."

The speaker sank upon her knees as humbly as a child before the absolving priests; and Ulrick, with an emotion of pity and admiration, exclaimed, as he raised his hands above her head:

"In His awful name, Parent of all, and in thy earthly parent's name, I bless and pardon thee; this deed shall be, in after times, by poets sung, thy virtues only live in our remembrance. But stay," he added, as his visitor resumed the lamp, and pointed

towards the door of the cell ; " I have a companion, one whose life hath for ten long years been wasted in these dungeons, one whose safety is necessary to clear my honour of the foul stain the tyrant cast upon it ! "

" The priest," said Ethra ; " I have not forgotten him ; he, too, shall be the companion of thy flight ; the path is open to ye both, for liberty and vengeance ! "

At the summons of our hero the wretched Robert of Artois issued from his den, and gazed for a few moments, with inquiring eyes, upon his two companions. A sign from the female informed him that Ulrick knew not that it was to his repentant child he was about to owe his liberty ; as his own knowledge of the tie between them was obtained only in the confessional, he was bound to silence. The unhappy woman, it would seem, had often sought him in his dungeon to receive consolation from his ministry, as well as to alleviate the horrors of his lone captivity with the sweet solace of sympathy and pity.

Bearing the lamp, Ethra preceded the liberated captives through the long damp passages which led to a small ruined tower beyond the second moat, and not far distant from the water's edge. From the unequal nature of the ground, they progressed slowly ; in many parts the stone-work had partially fallen, and they had to climb over the obstructing masses. At length they reached a low iron door, firmly imbedded in the solid walls. A figure, wrapped in a dark, warm mantle, sprang impulsively to meet them ; it was Myrra, who had been long impatiently expecting them. Throwing herself into her sister's arms, she exclaimed :

" Arrived—arrived at last ! How fearfully the dreary hour hath passed ! "

" Silence," whispered Ethra ; " remember your promise. Till safe beyond these walls our father must not know his wretched daughter lives—wedded to him who caused his house's ruin. "

The next moment the still trembling girl was folded to Ulrick's manly breast. A deep pang wrung the heart of the elder sister as she saw the fond paternal kiss—a kiss her blighted cheek was destined never more to feel—a kiss which would have been dearer to her heart than the first smile e'en of an angel's love.

Drawing from her vest the ponderous key, with a firm hand she applied it to the lock ; years had most probably elapsed since last the rusty door had groaned upon its hinges. Like some surly guardian, it seemed unwilling to give egress to the captives, resisting all her efforts to force back the ponderous bolt. It required the united strength of Ulrick and his companion to turn the key within the corroded wards. At last it slowly turned upon its axle, and the first breath of morning entered freshly the narrow passage.

" Free ! " exclaimed Robert of Artois, drinking with delight the

pure air to which for ten long years he had been a stranger. "I have dreamt of this, prayed for this, and it hath come at last. Relenting Heaven hath heard the lonely captive's supplication, and sent him forth for vengeance and atonement!"

"We shall meet again," said Myrra, in an under-tone, to her sister. "Promise me that we shall meet again."

"No tears," murmured Ethra, calmly—"no lamentation now! Yes, we shall meet again; if not on earth, at least in heaven, if penitence may win my forfeit place there. Ulrick of Stanfield," she added, in a loud, firm tone, "haste to thy friends; wait not for numbers, lest thy foe escape thee. Here will I station one to give thee ingress to the Norman's hold. Once there, thy sword must do the rest."

"The second night from this," replied our hero, "thou mayst expect me. On every hill the Saxon torch shall gleam, on every breeze the Saxon banner float. Yes, Ralph de Gael, a nation rises in its strength to crush thee. These towers, the scene of thy polluted sway, shall fall before the cry of liberty."

"Let it but sound," added his deliverer, "and fearfully my acts shall answer it. Away!" she exclaimed, impatiently; "each moment of delay is fraught with danger to thy safety."

Despite the entreaties of Ulrick and the silent pleadings of her sister, Ethra remained firm in her resolution not to accompany them; her soul was fixed on the accomplishment of her fearful destiny, and she resolved to meet it calmly and alone.

"'Tis past!" she said, as after repeated efforts she succeeded in rolling back the ponderous door which shut her from liberty and those she loved, for ever—"life's last weakness is past, and the few hours which remain are due to prayer, to penitence, and vengeance. My heart is lighter now that I feel a father's curse will not rest upon his poor girl's grave—armed with his forgiveness, I dare to hope for Heaven's. No weakness," she added, as with an impatient gesture she dashed aside the tears which, despite her resolution, chased each other down her burning cheek; "no vain regrets, no weak, relenting pity. Here will I wait, and watch the hour whose sound shall strike for freedom and for justice, shall calm the tempests of life's stormy passions, and bring this weary, long-worn, restless spirit peace."

Seating herself upon a rough fragment of the fallen arch, Ethra passed the first hour of her lonely watch in silent, fervent prayer.

As soon as the fugitives emerged from the ruined towers in which the secret passage terminated, Robert of Artois bade adieu to his companions, and directed his steps towards the convent, where, after much difficulty, he succeeded in obtaining an interview with the prior, and making himself known to him. The indignation of the monks was boundless at the outrage offered to their order in the person of their brother. In its first burst,

they threatened nothing less than death and excommunication upon the Norman governor, whose tyranny and exactions they had frequently felt in common with their oppressed and insulted Saxon neighbours.

Despite the secrecy with which the arrest of Ulrick had been conducted, the news soon reached the ears of the insurgent leaders, and spread dismay amongst them. It required all the influence of Arad and his son Edward to prevent many of the lesser franklins and chiefs from returning to their homes. Without Ulrick to conduct them, they looked upon their cause as hopeless; so well they knew, not only his skill in war, but the influence his name exercised with the serfs and people. His sudden appearance amongst them, therefore, the morning after his escape, decided their deliberations; the shout of joy which welcomed him was as sincere as the relief from their uncertainty was great. In an instant Edward was by the side of his loved Myrra, whispering those thousand tender consolations which love so well can utter.

"Welcome!" cried Arad, grasping the hand of his recovered friend; "think not we have been idle in your cause; this very day we marched to share your fate, or tear you from the tyrant's cruel power; but say," he added, "how fell you into his hands?"

"By Saxon treachery," replied Ulrick; "the cause so oft of England's weakness in the hour of trial. Ethwold, to revenge my refusal of his proffered union with my child, betrayed me to the Norman."

The name of his betrayer was received with a shout of execration by the assembled chiefs.

"And how escaped?" they demanded.

"By the remorse of one who long has lived a wretched victim to her wayward passions, but in whose heart all trace of Eden is not yet extinguished. Despite her thrall, she feels her country's wrongs—despite the tie which binds her to its tyrant, will avenge them."

"Her name? her name?" was demanded on all sides.

"That," resumed our hero, "have I still to learn; this packet tells the rest of her sad history."

Ulrick hastily broke the silken thread which bound the parchment Ethra had given to him ere he left the dungeon. It contained a ring, and a tress of her long, dark hair. For a few seconds he gazed upon the trinket with mute surprise, deeming that memory had played him false, or that he had seen the gem before.

"Surely," he murmured, "I have seen this glittering toy in happier days! It was Matilda's! given on the morning that I called her bride. Thou precious bauble, in whose magic circle recollection, with enchanter's power, recalls to mind past scenes of

happiness and joys long fled ! Something," he added wildly, "she told me of her home destroyed—her father, long thought dead. Could it ?—No, no—I should have known my child ; and yet this ring, once the fond pledge of chaste, connubial love, gives token of a dreadful tale to come. Read, Myrra, read, and save me from the rack."

With a trembling hand he passed the parchment to his equally agitated child, whose eyes could scarcely decipher the few characters, so blinded were their orbs by tears. In a voice broken by sobs and sighs she read :

"Father, mourn not for Ethra ; in freedom's cause she dies—happy at last if thy forgiveness rest upon her grave."

The writing fell from her hand as she concluded, and with a burst of grief she threw herself into her father's arms, who remained for several moments as if transfixed to stone—his misery so vast that at first he neither felt nor comprehended its extent. As it gradually broke upon him, the tempest of his soul became terrible, his hand wandered over his burning brow, as if to reseat reason on her tottering throne ; and when at last his words broke forth, they but faintly indicated the agony of his tortured mind.

"My child," he murmured ; "my lost, suffering child ! left by her father in that den of crime ! Nature, that now canst struggle with convulsive throes, why wert thou silent when in agony she cried to be forgiven ? Earth should have shook, the heavens sent forth portentous and prodigious signs, to see a father murder his own child ! Yes, chieftains," he added, gazing wildly on the assembled Saxons round him, "unknowing whom I judged, I, sternly zealous for my country's good, praised her resolve, and let her stay to die."

"Horror !" said Arad ; "thy child ?"

"Ay," continued the agitated parent, with a burst of passionate love ; "my elder born—the first fond pledge of my connubial bliss, is by her father doomed and sacrificed. Friends, these tears I am not used to shed flow from me like a girl's. Bear with me ; Nature will claim her rights, despite the heart's resolve, or cold philosophy's stern reasoning. The weakness past, I am once more my country's."

Drawing his mantle over his visage, the speaker retreated to a short distance from the assembly to commune with his heart, and seek consolation where, in life's shipwrecks and the storms of passion, weak, erring man alone can find it—in prayer. Although the blow had been terrible, it had wounded but not crushed his soul ; it rose with the elasticity of faith to meet the last trial Heaven had reserved to test his fortitude and patience. In a short time he returned to his silent, sympathising friends, pale with the fearful struggle he had passed, but calm and self-possessed. Many thought, as they beheld him, they saw the stamp of death upon his face—so

cold and colourless, so worn and rigid, his agony of soul had made it. His was indeed the majesty of sorrow. The first burst of natural weakness past, and it became far too deep for words, too proud for tears; like death, it veiled its dignity in silence, and only spoke its presence in its impress.

Calmly he proceeded to give his orders to the different leaders: some were despatched to raise the country round; others sent into the city to urge the discontented citizens to join them—a task more than half-accomplished to their hands; as, on their arrival, they found the indignant monks preaching not only in the market-place, but in every spot where a group could be collected, detailing to their horror-stricken hearers the imprisonment and sufferings of the tortured and persecuted Father Onfroy. The vast piles of wood collected for the purpose on St. James's Hill and the neighbouring heights, at the first stroke of midnight, were ordered to be fired, as signals for the coming onslaught, which Ulrick, in person, undertook to direct. To Edward and a party of his own retainers, who, on the first news of his return, had marched to the place of meeting, our hero confided the entrance of the secret passage, which Ethra had promised should be opened to their ingress. Had he dreamt that his child would have unbarred the door, her anxious father would himself have conducted the enterprise, and resigned to another the more dangerous post of leading the assault without the walls—but it was not to be; their last words on earth were spoken. In life the heart-broken parent and his repentant child were doomed never to meet again. When all was arranged, and not till then, Ulrick and the weeping Myrra retired to mourn together.

Our readers may well imagine the rage and terror of Ralph de Gael when informed not only of the flight of his captives, but of the absence of his scorned and long-neglected wife, whose remorse and jealousy he doubted not had opened their dungeon doors. Fortunately, the men who searched the prisons proceeded no farther than the empty cells; had they done so, they would have found the patient Ethra watching the arrival of the foe, praying for the hour to strike—the signal of her triumph and her death. The tyrant knew too well the energy of his enemy and the danger which threatened him not to prepare to meet it. The garrison were all recalled within the walls of the castle, every tower was manned, the furnaces for heating the boiling lead and oil to pour upon the assailants were got ready; but his chief reliance was on the arrival of the king, to whom our readers will remember, on the first news of the intended outbreak, he had despatched a trusty messenger.

"Let but Henry come," he exclaimed, "within three days, and I will crush this nest of hornets—trample them like mire beneath my feet. Our walls," he added, as he cast a glance around the lofty battlements, and surveyed the preparations for the siege, "may hold the Saxon scum at bay and mock their idle efforts."

The boaster either forgot in his pride, or was ignorant of, the passages which conducted, one to the lonely tower where outraged woman's vengeance watched; the other to the cloisters of the cathedral, by which, on a previous occasion, Ulrick, guided by Father Oswald, had escaped.

As the day rolled on, parties of men, variously armed, might be seen entering the city at every gate. The place of rendezvous was the vast plain which surrounded the castle—not as now, partially built upon and occupied by narrow dirty streets, but open and level to the river's edge. Crowds of citizens gradually joined them; and even before the arrival of the more regular forces of the Saxon chiefs, the insurgents presented a formidable array of undisciplined numbers.

The inhabitants of Norwich had long been dissatisfied with the tyranny and grinding exactions of their worthless governor, whose interest had twice defeated them in their attempts to obtain a charter for their city—a boon frequently promised and as frequently withheld by their vacillating monarch.

Ralph de Gael was far too experienced a commander to waste the energies of his men before the moment of attack. He permitted, therefore, the assembling of the insurgents without attempting to disperse them. His policy was to rest on the defensive until the arrival of the royal forces which Henry, he doubted not, would despatch to his assistance on the first news of the intended outbreak. Doubly did he applaud his own prudence and foresight in sending a messenger to the king when banner after banner of the Saxon nobles appeared upon the ground. He saw that it was no petty feud he had to encounter, but the strength of the Angles arrayed against him. Once, and once only, did his cheek turn pale, as the crane-embazoned pennon of the lord of Stanfield was planted, amidst the enthusiastic cheers of the enemy, upon a small rising mound almost within bowshot of the walls. Conscience whispered him the contest about to commence was to be one of life and death; and secretly the tyrant prayed that Henry might arrive in time to his assistance. The day rolled on, and still he saw no symptoms of an attack from the tents and huts which the Saxons erected. It was evident that they contemplated reducing him by siege rather than assault.

"Good!" he murmured; "the fools fall in the snare. Do they think to starve the lion in his den? Soon shall they find that Norman swords are sharper than their wits!"

Turning upon his heel with a shrug of disdain to those about him, to indicate his contempt of the foe, he left the battlements and descended to the banquet-hall, where the evening repast was spread.

At the midnight hour the assailants divided their forces into three equal parties. The first, under the conduct of Ulrick,

advanced towards the drawbridge, where a strong body of archers and billmen were stationed to protect the only approach to the elevated mound on which the castle stood. Their position was further strengthened by a numerous body of men-at-arms, who, from the summit of the lofty tower which formed the principal entrance to the fortress, were ready to pour down boiling lead, oil, stones, and missiles on all who should approach the gates. So that, in the event of the first attack upon the bridge proving successful, the retreat of the defenders into the interior would be effectually covered.

The second party, guided by the indignant monks, were conducted, under the command of Arad, to the secret passage which our readers will remember connected the cathedral with the castle chapel, and which would enable the Saxons to attack the building in the rear, where perhaps it was the most assailable.

The third, guided by Edward, proceeded to the lone, round watch-tower by the water's edge. This was the most dangerous of all to the safety of the garrison, for it conducted to the very heart of the stronghold. Its existence, either forgotten or unsuspected by Ralph de Gael, baffled alike his calculation and his courage. Little did the heartless voluptuary imagine, whilst he gave the necessary orders for the defence, and smiled in the fancied security of his position, that the hand of a weak woman would render his precautions unavailing. In his pride and wantonness he had sown the seed of desolation; the hour had struck when he must reap the harvest of the whirlwind and the storm.

At the first signal of the Saxons the ponderous iron door rolled slowly upon its hinges, and Ethra, pale as her destiny, appeared before them. The first glance assured her that Ulrick was not the leader of the host, and her heart beat lighter. In the long lonely hours of her silent watch her fear had been to meet her father's eye—to listen to his voice again—to expose her stern resolve, to perish in the ruins she had caused, to the entreaties of paternal love, or the weak pleadings of her woman's nature.

"Ascend the passage branching to the left!" she exclaimed to the foremost of the band; "it will conduct ye to your victims. I need not tell you, let your hearts be firm and your good weapons strong."

A shout from the eager Saxons proved that she was understood. Despite her worn appearance—for she had neither quitted her post nor tasted food since Ulrick's departure—and the simplicity of her dark robe and veil, there was a commanding dignity in her manner which enabled Edward to recognise the unhappy wife of Ralph de Gael. Eager for her safety, he entreated her to allow him to send her, under escort, to the camp, urging that the terrors of so fearful a night were ill suited to a woman's presence.

"I will not keep one soldier," she impatiently interrupted,

"from the work of vengeance. Is this an hour to think of women's safety, when knightly blows are to be struck, and freedom to be won? Away, and leave me here." Turning to the men, she added, with a voice and gesture such as Boadicea might have used when urging her subjects against the Romans, "As ye rush on triumphant through the halls, think of the homes your foes have made a desert!—the blood they shed in mockery and scorn! Let the remembrance of your country's wrongs nerve well each arm to strike the oppressor dead!"

With an eager shout, the Saxons, excited by her words, sprang forward, and Edward, despite his reluctance to leave her unprotected, was compelled to follow in the stream.

"'Tis well," she exclaimed, as the last flash of their torches disappeared in the windings of the low subterranean passage; "once more I am alone, and mistress of myself. Triumph, my soul!—exult, and taste of joy! My genius rises o'er my foe victorious; and this great deed satiates at once my hate and my revenge. 'Tis worth long years of suffering to live for such an hour as this. Yes, Ralph de Gael," she added, bitterly, "I pay thee now for heartless scorn, neglect, insulted love. The Saxon wife hath set the Saxon bloodhounds on thy track—the outraged child avenged her murdered mother."

In the excitement of the moment, which partook more of madness than of passion, Ethra continued to pace, with hurried step, the entrance of the vault, muttering alternately words of reproach, or giving vent to the insane expression of her triumph. Soon the shouts of the Saxons, as they burst upon their astonished foe, reached her, and her pale lips quivered, her dark eyes flashed with redoubled brilliancy at the signal which told her fearful vengeance was accomplished. Catching up a torch which one of the followers of Edward had dropped in his haste, she began to trace her way to the scene of blood and slaughter.

"The conflict is begun," she cried; "I go to perish in the storm my breath hath raised."

Despite the impetuosity with which Ulrick commenced his attack upon the bridge, it would have proved unsuccessful against the compact body of archers stationed there had not the party of Saxons under Edda, whom the monks had guided, burst from the chapel and attacked them in the rear. The Normans, thus doubly assailed, seeing all hope of retreat into the interior of the castle cut off, fought with desperate courage, but in vain; the conflict became too close to permit them to use their bows, and the missiles which the men-at-arms stationed on the tower continued to hurl down were not more destructive to their enemies than to themselves. Their light steel barrets proved but an inefficient protection against the heavy clubs with which the Saxon serfs were armed; heads and helmets were alike crushed beneath their blows, and many

chose death by plunging into the deep moat beneath, which soon ran purple with their blood, rather than meet it from the desperate Saxons' hands.

After an hour's hard fighting the bridge was cleared, and the assailants remained masters of the position, which, however, advanced them but little in their general attack, for the iron-studded gates resisted all their efforts, while from the lofty battlements directly over them the besieged kept raining down showers of boiling oil and melted lead, and ponderous beams of wood, which crushed by dozens the unhappy mutilated wretches upon whom they fell.

Ralph de Gael, who directed the defence, beheld with pleasure the foe recoil before the destructive missiles. In the insolence of his triumph he addressed their leader with every taunt and insult his malice could suggest.

"What!" he exclaimed, ironically, "retreat so soon! Strike one blow more! Or is Saxon courage cooled with its first check? For the future, women and girls shall guard our walls, and hold them, too, 'gainst such assailants. Ulrick," he added, "had Stanfield towers been kept like mine, my sword had found its task less easy. I almost blush to have crushed so poor an enemy."

"Coward!—cool, insulting coward!" replied our hero, his eyes flashing fire at the allusion to his once happy home, "descend from thy stronghold, and let the sword decide between us. I'll stake my country's wrongs and rights upon the issue."

"Thinkst thou I am so poor a gamester?" shouted the tyrant, with an insulting laugh, "to risk that which is mine already? The gibbet, knave, and not a noble's sword, is the fit doom thy rash presumption merits. Slaves," he continued, addressing the Saxons, who had retreated beyond the reach of the burning shower, "Henry will soon be here; long ere this the royal banner floats upon the breeze. To your homes—your homes; wait not the lion's wrath, lest it consume ye."

The assertion of the expected arrival of the king, who was known to be at a day's march from the city, struck a damp on the hearts of many, and might have produced the effect the speaker artfully intended, had not the shouts and cries within the walls informed them that one part at least of their attack had been successful—that Edward and his troop had obtained an entrance to the castle.

The tyrant's flushed cheek turned pale as the war-cry of the victorious Saxons fell upon his ear.

The next moment Richard de Montmar, the seneschal, his sword broken, and his gashed brow streaming with blood, appeared upon the walls before his terror-stricken master.

"What meant that cry?" he faltered.

"The foe are in our walls; like Cadmus' sons, they rise from

earth. Our men, discouraged, murmur treason, and demand their leader. To the hall, or all is lost."

For a few moments his chief stood as if struck by the destroying angel's hand, so wild, so improbable did the intelligence appear; nor was it till the renewed cries of the combatants burst upon the air that he started from his mental palsy. Calling to his men, he rushed from the walls, to stem the tide which Heaven had so mysteriously turned against him. In a few minutes the battlements were deserted, except by the wounded and the dying who had fallen beneath the arrows of the Saxons.

Ulrick, who judged the cause of the confusion, suffered not the advantage to be lost; but redoubled his efforts against the no longer well-defended gates, which, from their massive strength, for a time continued to defy his utmost efforts. While the assailants, with renewed vigour, are continuing the attack, let us follow the dismayed Norman to the scene which met his gaze within his hitherto deemed impregnable stronghold.

A large portion of the garrison were assembled in the great hall of the castle fighting desperately with the Saxons, who, under the conduct of Edward, occupied the low arched galleries which ran round the apartment, and from which their arrows did fearful execution upon their enemies; the floor was strewn with the dead and dying, whose mingled groans, yells of agony, and execrations added to the horrors of the scene. In the centre of the hall stood the excited Ethra; her right hand holding a torch; her long dark hair, freed from the veil which she had lost in the tumult, streaming like a meteor in the wind. Regardless of her own safety, she urged on her countrymen to the attack, her shrill voice rising above the din of arms as she reminded them of the wrongs and shames their Norman tyrants had inflicted on their hearths and homes.

"Traitor!" exclaimed Ralph, as he confronted her, "it is to thee I owe this desolation, this ruin of my hopes. Thine was the accursed hand to release my deadly foes, and bring the Saxon hound upon my track."

Ethra surveyed him with a look of withering scorn and an unblanched cheek; the haughty spirit of her race was on her, and though a secret instinct told her that the dark thread of her existence in a few moments would be severed, her heart trembled not, neither did her voice falter as she answered him:

"Monster! thinkst thou I would leave my gallant father in thy grasp, and have the power to save him? Is't not enough thou hast lured me to foul perdition's brink, but thou wouldst plunge my guileless sister in the dread abyss? Hark to that shout!" she added, as the triumphant voices of the assailants, who had just broken in the outward gates, burst upon her ear; "'tis the victorious cry of Liberty rejoicing to behold her children free. The Saxon,

the despised Saxon, hunts thee now ; the spirits of my slaughtered kindred ride upon the storm ; the furies claim thee as their destined prey. Soon shall they be avenged."

The passion of her tyrant was too intense for words ; surprise, too, held him chained. His hitherto submissive victim, whose heart he had trampled on, whose feelings wantonly sported with, had turned like a lioness to rend him. With a look of concentrated hatred, he twice passed his sword through her defenceless body, and the betrayed, unhappy Ethra fell, without one groan or sigh, a corpse at her destroyer's feet. She had met the fate she sought. Love, honour, happiness were lost ; and as freely as the sea-bird dashed the spray from its soiled wing, she cast her life away, a cold smile of triumph lighting her features even in death.

The murderer had not long to exult over his revenge, for the voice of Ulrick urging on his followers, or calling with passionate vehemence upon his child, alarmed him for his own worthless safety. Calling on his esquire and a party of the most determined of his men to follow him, he made his way over the mangled and the dying to a corner of the hall, where a narrow staircase led to a solitary turret, the flat roof of which was large enough, perhaps, to hold fifty men, and which one determined sword might defend against a host of enemies.

"Turn, craven hound !" shouted our hero to him, as he ascended the steps. The defiance which would have followed was cut short by a pang such as a father's heart alone could feel. His child—his deeply loved, long-mourned, repentant child—lay weltering in her life's blood e'en at his very feet. With a cry like that a breaking heart sends forth, he sank upon his knee beside her. The warrior was extinct—the parent only lived within his breast.

"Wake !" he sobbed, as he pressed his lips with passionate tenderness to her cold brow ; "wake to hear the pardon thou hast so dearly won. Ethra—child of my love, first-born of my hope—one look, one little pressure of thy hand ! Dead, dead !" he murmured. "God, my brain is on fire—my heart is broken !"

So majestic was the grief of the bereaved parent that even his enemies respected it. These, however, were soon driven from the hall by the arrival of Arad and the party under his command. The slaughter on both sides had been fearful, for Norman and Saxon fought with all the bitterness of long-garnered hate. The castle, with the exception of the solitary tower into which Ralph and his party had retreated, was in possession of the assailants, when an unexpected event entirely changed the fortunes of the night.

Henry, who had been holding his Parliament at Bury St. Edmund's, was in council when the missive of the governor of the East Angles was presented to him. His indignation, as well as that of his nobles, was extreme. That the man whom he had

snatched from justice should so ungratefully repay his mercy stung him to the quick ; and he swore, by the oath of his race, to proceed at once to Norwich, and execute strict justice on the offenders. Despite the haste of his march, the battle was fought ere he arrived. But the overwhelming force which accompanied him rendered all resistance on the part of the victorious Saxons unavailing ; and they saw the fruits of victory snatched from them even in the moment of success. The larger body of them retired to their homes ; and Ulrick, Arad, Edward, and most of the chiefs remained prisoners in the hands of the Normans.

At an early hour on the following morning a council was held in the chapter-house of the cathedral, at which the king presided in person. Ralph de Gael, Salisbury, De Warrenne, De Vere of Oxford, and many barons of less note, were seated at the board. When the chancellor, our hero's old enemy, took his seat, the forgeries, upon which on a previous occasion the lord of Stanfield had been condemned, lay open on the table. At a signal from Henry, Ulrick and his companions in misfortune were introduced. His cheek was pale from loss of blood and the fierce emotions which had so lately wrung his soul. But if his step faltered from weakness, his eye was bright and proud as ever ; it shrank not from the stern gaze of his judges, nor quailed beneath the triumphant sneer of his oppressor. Henry was the first to speak.

"My lords," he exclaimed, "we are here to judge an ingrate and a traitor, whom I confess that, with a weakness unworthy of a king, yielding to an angel's prayer, I saved from your resentment. Of Ralph de Gael's administration, and the oppressions of which he is accused, we will decide hereafter. But however they may palliate," he added, pointing to the other Saxon chiefs, "the outbreak of these misguided men, they excuse not the lord of Stanfield—the plotter, the assassin."

"The wronged, the slandered !" exclaimed a deep-toned voice, at whose sound all present started.

The doors of the chapter-house were thrown open, and Robert of Artois, dressed in his priestly rags, just as Ethra had released him from his dungeon, stood before them.

"Wretch !" he cried, fixing a glance of scorn upon the man who had so long held him captive ; "here, within these holy walls—here, in the presence of Heaven and of man, avow your treachery and Ulrick's wrongs, detested, grovelling, most unknighly villain !"

"Who art thou ?" demanded the chancellor.

"Ask of yon monster," resumed the speaker, pointing to the astonished Ralph de Gael—"of him who for ten years hath held me captive in a loathsome cell, till of humanity its memory only rests—of him who, to conceal his murders, outrages, and crimes, forced me, an unworthy priest of the Most High—by tortures

forced me to forge the proofs on which you would condemn the preserver of your monarch's life, and crush the noblest heart that tyranny e'er reached."

"Liar!" faltered the detected but unabashed miscreant—"what proof?"

"What proof!" iterated his accuser, with a cold smile, whose serpent-like expression was far more terrible than even his impassioned scorn. "Fear not, thou shalt hear proof enough to satisfy the doubt of incredulity itself—to brand the festering lie upon thy brow—to show thee to the world the monster that thou art, and strip thee of the last defence falsehood and infamy have left thee."

"Assertion is not evidence," interrupted the chancellor, rising uneasily from his seat.

"True," said the repentant man; "and an angel's oath would lack conviction to a heart like thine, seared in the subtle trickeries of office, and dead to every generous, natural impulse. Behold the proof!"

Hastily taking up the forged letters one by one, he laid them before the king. Passing over them, at the same time, a sponge dipped in some aromatic essence which he drew from his breast, to the surprise of the monarch and his councillors and the confusion of Ralph, a second inscription appeared beneath the first.

Henry seized the paper, and eagerly read as follows:

"I, Onfroy, caligrapher, and priest of the cathedral church of Norwich, trusting that Heaven will one day bring my weakness and the cruelty of Ralph de Gael to light, declare that, having been twice put to the torture, I have reluctantly consented to forge these letters, being prisoner the while to the aforesaid Ralph de Gael."

Our readers need scarcely be reminded that the composition of the sympathetic ink was, in the age of which we write, a secret confined chiefly to the cloister.

"Monster! unknighly felon!" exclaimed the king, as the last letter fell from his indignant hand, "what answer for thy worthless life—what subterfuge or subtle turn can serve thee now?"

"Sorcery," replied Ralph, desperately resolved to brave it to the last. "Relying on my innocence and Heaven's assistance, I demand the knightly combat."

Henry, surnamed "Beauclerk," was not to be deceived by an excuse which the more superstitious of his council took into their serious consideration. Whilst they clustered round the council-table to consult on the demand, the king approached the prisoner, whose cheek had proudly flushed on hearing the proofs of his innocence, but in a few seconds became paler than before.

"Lord of Stanfield," demanded the agitated monarch, "canst thou forgive the involuntary wrong I most unwittingly have done thee?"

"Protect my child—redress my country's wrongs," sighed our hero, "and all is well."

"Heaven!" exclaimed the king, "he is dying!"

His fears were but too true. Worn by loss of blood, and the many bitter trials he had undergone, the tired spirit of our hero was rapidly passing away to rejoin those he had loved, but failed to avenge, on earth. His eye-lids were half-closed in death when the voice of the chancellor for a few moments recalled him to the world.

"The battle is accorded," he coldly pronounced; "let the sword decide between the accused and the accuser."

The usages of chivalry with the Normans were sacred. Monarchs and nobles alike were bound by them; and the chancellor and his party thought by their decision to avoid the odium of so foul an accusation being proved against a member of their own order. Henry heard their decision with indignation, anger, and contempt.

"The combat!" he repeated; "and with a dying man!"

"I am ready!" faintly exclaimed Ulrick, like some wounded lion rearing his form erect to meet the hunter's last attack; "where is my sword?" and weakened by the effort, he fell back into the arms of Arad. Henry pointed to his feeble state in silence.

"Let him appear by champion!" exclaimed the council, in answer to his mute appeal.

"Be it so!" said Henry, with a burst of wrath, which told the presuming barons they had gone too far. "I'll be his champion. Ulrick of Stanfield," he continued, taking the dying hero's hand, "I here proclaim thee innocent—the soul of honour and the light of truth. Most foully hath thy vile accuser lied. There lies my glove—a monarch's glove shall be thy gage of battle."

Suiting the action to the word, the excited king threw his embroidered glove upon the ground. None presumed to raise it. The Norman nobles would have gone far to save one of their order, but not one felt disposed to brave a wrath which, once roused, might consume them. Even the chancellor was silenced, for he knew that Henry, when really excited, was capable of daring everything. There was a solemn silence in the hall, which the monarch was the first to break.

"No answer!" he exclaimed. "Away with him, then! De Vere, you act as marshal. In ten minutes let the trumpet's breath proclaim that he hath met a felon's doom."

Despite his protestations, Ralph de Gael was dragged from the assembly, and in a less space of time than even the king had announced, the fearful signal was heard, and his last sigh passed from him on the gibbet.

"Ulrick," said his champion, "preserver of my life, I have avenged thee."

"More," answered our hero, with a last effort; "thou hast preserved my honour. All is over, and the prediction of the prophet priest of Croydon is accomplished."

"I remember," added Henry; "a life of honour, a soldier's triumph, but a broken heart."

A smile of gratitude passed over the features of the dying man, as he fixed his last look upon the speaker. That smile remained after the spirit of Ulrick had passed away.

Most of the Saxon chiefs were pardoned. Henry kept his Christmas at Norwich, and granted the citizens their first charter, in compensation for the exactions which they had suffered from their unprincipled governor, who was found to have amassed enormous wealth by his oppression. Before the monarch left the city, the marriage of Myrra and Edward was solemnised in the presence of the Court by Robert of Artois, who did not long survive his restoration to liberty, but was found dead at the tomb of Ulrick, whither he went daily to offer up his prayers.

END OF VOL. I.

VOL. II.

STANFIELD HALL.



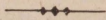
[LADY STANFIELD'S APPEAL TO THE KING.]

B

THE OFFICIAL



STANFIELD HALL.



VOL. II.—CHRONICLE OF THE HEIRESS.

CHAPTER I.

IN 1515 Henry VIII. reigned, and Wolsey swayed the destinies of the English nation. The moral portraiture of the monarch and his minister presents the same peculiarities which their likeness, painted on canvas by the united pencils of Titian and Rembrandt, might have done : masses of glorious colouring—brilliant, dazzling, and life-like—starting from deep and gloomy shadows—the contrast of the sunbeam and the thunder-cloud, midnight and the glare of noon. Europe in the beginning of the sixteenth century presented a gallery of living portraits such as few ages have seen. The magnificent Leo X., the astute Charles V., the gallant Francis I., Henry, Wolsey, Luther, Erasmus, and Melancthon, all left the impress of their minds upon the destiny of the world.

Henry at this period began to manifest, although but slightly, that distaste towards his wife which ultimately led to the downfall of his favourite, and the separation of the kingdom from the Church of Rome. In estimating the character of this prince, it ought to be remembered that the marriage with his brother's widow was a political one, and that he was a mere boy when it was contracted. Henry VII., touched by remorse, it is said, on his death-bed, had strongly advised him not to fulfil the contract, which Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, despite the dispensation of the Pope, never could be brought to approve. Unfortunately, the interests and opinions of his father's ministers and council prevailed ; and six weeks after he became king he gave his hand to the unfortunate Catherine of Arragon—a princess who had actually been married to his elder, and afterwards affianced to his younger, brother the Duke of York.

This inauspicious union, from the very first, was distasteful to the clergy and a great portion of his subjects, who justly considered

that the bull of Julius II., which dispensed with the canon of the Church, was granted by that pontiff more from the desire of embarrassing his enemy, Louis XII. of France, by thus cementing the alliance between England and Spain, than a due consideration of those higher motives which ought to have guided the head of the Catholic world.

We have touched thus lightly upon the subject at the commencement of our tale, to avoid those dry historical details which might interfere with its progress and action, and to enable our readers to understand that Henry was not altogether swayed by caprice in seeking to dissolve a marriage so opposed to the prejudice of the age and the faith of his subjects, many of whom regarded the death of his sons by Catherine as a punishment for his incestuous union.

At the period at which our tale commences, Wolsey had attained as a subject all but the climax of his ambition ; the great seal of England, held by the primate, Warham, alone was wanting to complete his authority. Rome had decorated him with the purple, and his confiding master had bestowed on him not only the archbishopric of York, but the rich see of Durham, the abbey of St. Alban's, which he held *in commendam*, and the revenues of the bishoprics of Bath, Worcester, and Hereford, the incumbents of which being foreigners, residing in Italy, were glad to compound with the haughty cardinal for a pension in lieu of the income of their preferments. From these resources the magnificent churchman displayed a state which rivalled the Crown in pomp. He had lords and knights in the number of his household servants ; when he said Mass in the royal chapel, two dukes presented him the water ; indeed, so tenacious was he of this service, that it is said the cause of his enmity to Buckingham arose from that haughty nobleman insultingly emptying the basin at his feet after he had unwillingly performed it.

The usual crowd of idlers were assembled on the rude embankment near the tower of London, to watch the unloading of a foreign ship which had cast anchor on the preceding night. Amongst them might be counted City 'prentices, with their short clubs and saucy looks, idling away their masters' time ; old sailors, who were past service ; merchants, eager to receive their long-expected merchandise ; bowmen, on their way to the archery grounds—large unenclosed fields, lying between Shoreditch and the river ; besides the usual proportion of citizens' wives and daughters, who, with the curiosity natural to their sex, were gathered in little neighbourly coteries, commenting on the appearance of the crew of jolly, fresh-looking Flemings who manned the vessel.

"More broadcloth from Ghent !" exclaimed Master Sleeveboard, a rich draper of Cheapside, as he eyed the carefully-packed bales

which were being landed on the wharf. "Surely the produce of our English looms might content the gallants of the Court; but no, forsooth! nothing but foreign braveries will go down with them, I have not sold an ell of honest linsey-woolsey these three days; and the taxes, we all know, my masters," he added, "must be paid the same; trade or no trade, money must be had."

"Shame!" cried several who stood round; for the complaint was a popular one, the City being extremely dissatisfied at the preference given to foreign traders and their goods by the Court; a dissatisfaction which, a few years later, broke out into serious disturbances, and cost the lives of many of the citizens.

"At the last tourney at Greenwich," observed a member of the company of the Passamentiers, or Embroiderers, "his grace of Buckingham was the only noble who wore English braidings on his trappings."

"A cheer for the Duke of Buckingham!" exclaimed the crowd who had gathered round; "he is a true Englishman."

"And a friend to the Commons," observed one.

"Of the blood of John of Gaunt," added another.

"If you love him," observed a grave, elderly personage, dressed in a mulberry-coloured gown and hood, "the less you remind his enemies of his descent the better. Henry loves not those who stand too near the Throne. The hart is a gallant beast, but it is no match for the lion."

This allusion to the armorial bearings of the king and duke was perfectly understood by the people, who at that time, from the frequency of pageants, tilts, masques, and processions, were better acquainted with the devices of the nobility than even are the better classes of the present day, so hath the noble science of heraldry unfortunately fallen into disuse.

"How are the imposts to be paid," demanded a burly little citizen, "if we are to be inundated with foreign goods? The last war sweated the City sorely, and there are whispers of another benevolence."

"Not a word against the war," cried a young fellow, an armourer by trade, whose jaunty cap, rapier, and love-locks gave him a rakish appearance; "I'll not hear a word against the late war. I am an armourer. Live and let live. I sold more blades and corslets in that one year than my father did in all the late king's reign. Besides, did not the emperor himself take soldier's service under our noble Henry?"

"Ay, and a general's pay," interrupted several.

"Ask Martin, of St. Paul's, if the tent of cloth of gold in which the recruit was lodged was ever paid for?" added Sleeveboard.

"The war cost half a million."

"And what advantage did we gain by that?" shouted the crowd.

"Advantage!" iterated the armourer with indignation; "why we beat the French, and Henry won the city of Tournay."

"And the cardinal," quietly added the stranger in the mulberry-coloured gown and hood, the same who had just before rebuked them for their imprudent zeal for the Duke of Buckingham, "obtained the bishopric—the usual division between intelligence and strength, or Church and State—the king the shell, the subtle priest the oyster. What, in the name of fortune, will he aim at next?"

"The great seal, perhaps," suggested Sleeveboard timidly, for he liked not speaking of his eminence of York; "he hath long had an eye to it, and will not withhold his hand."

"Or the Papal chair?" observed the armourer, with whom Wolsey was no favourite; "sure that might content him."

"Would anything content him?" continued the stranger. "Once Pope, he would quarrel with St. Peter for his keys; he hath an appetite more greedy than his fortunes; besides, who ever yet beheld that *rara avis*, a contented priest?"

At this last speech there was an instant pause in the conversation—if that may be called such where every speaker vociferated at his pleasure. So great was the terror which Wolsey's name inspired, from his arrogance and well-known vindictiveness of character, that few men cared to mention him; in fact, Henry himself was scarcely more feared than his all-powerful minister. The old substantial citizens, therefore, walked quietly away, leaving the indiscreet stranger, and a knot of the lower classes, such as the 'prentices and sailors, standing by themselves upon the quay. Of the better order, the armourer alone remained, and he continued for some time to eye the speaker with a look of droll surprise; the former met his gaze as if perfectly unaware of the effect his words had produced.

"Thou hadst more care for the duke's safety than for thine own," quietly observed the young man at last.

"Perhaps not," said the stranger; "at least my purpose is answered."

"And that was?"

"To get rid of the meddling citizens—fellows who attend to every man's business except their own—who grumble at cent. per cent. upon their dealings, calling it scant profit."

"You expect merchandise, then," observed the armourer, "by yonder vessel?"

"I do."

"Contraband?" continued his questioner.

"Ay—wilt thou assist me? There is a broad noble to be won."

At this moment a boat put off from the ship. Instead of bales of goods, it was charged with three passengers—a lady and a child, together with a male attendant. The latter was a burly, honest-

looking Englishman, of about forty, whose bronze face told that he had been exposed to the wars; whilst his round, half-bald head, short neck, and broad shoulders, gave a sort of bulldog character to his appearance. The female, who was dressed in deep mourning, was evidently in the last stage of consumption. The hectic colour on her thin cheek contrasted painfully with its unearthly whiteness; her attenuated hand shook as she held the dark veil which partially shaded her features, and which her feeble strength could scarcely retain in its place against the gusts of wind, which was blowing freshly. A beautiful child, with long, curling hair, and blue, thoughtful eyes, was seated next her, endeavouring, with infantine grace and watchfulness, to prevent the breeze from incommoding her mother, by assisting to hold, with her little hands, the rebellious veil in its proper place.

"Behold the merchandise I expect," coolly observed the elder, fixing his eyes intently on the boat. "Mother, child, and servitor, all three are there"; and he counted them deliberately upon his fingers as he named them.

"And they are your wife, child, and servitor?" observed the young man, curiously; for he began to suspect, although but vaguely, that the intentions of the speaker were anything but friendly towards the travellers; besides, there was something unnatural to him in designating human beings as merchandise.

A momentary contraction of the muscles, as if a spasm had suddenly seized him, passed over the countenance of the stranger, as he answered with the monosyllable, "No," in a voice so cold and iron-like, it sounded as an ice-drop as it fell.

"Occupy not thyself with me or with my motives, young man," he said, in his usual tone, in answer to the look of mute inquiry with which the armourer regarded him, "since both are past thy scrutiny. Enough—I am of those who pay for service rendered. The task I ask of thee is easy to perform."

"And honest?" demanded the young man, doubtfully.

"And honest," continued the speaker. "It is but to follow yon strangers through the City, and bring me word where they reside. There," he added, "is a piece of gold for thy present service; its fellow shall be thine on thy return. Are we agreed in this?"

"We are—where shall we meet?"

"At St. Paul's Cross—before the vesper hymn."

With this understanding the two strangely-assorted companions parted; the elder, evidently wishing to avoid recognition, drew his velvet hood over his face; the younger observed, as he did so, that his fingers were encircled by gems of price, such as by the sumptuary laws none but a noble might presume to wear.

The young man, Cuthbert the armourer, whom we have thus introduced to our readers, like most of the City roysterers of the day, possessed more heart than head—more courage than prudence.

Accustomed from the very nature of his trade to the profession of arms, there were few skirmishes with the City Watch in which he failed to bear a part; but as he was ever ready to stand up for his ward, and bore a good character, these little outbreaks had hitherto been winked at by the alderman, whose niece, it was whispered, more than shared her uncle's partiality for the handsome craftsman.

Although, from the wars, feuds, and quarrels—to say nothing of the tournaments of the age—he was seldom without work, it was quite as seldom, from his reckless generous habits, that he had anything beyond a few silver pennies in his purse; and the lightly won golden noble, together with the promise of a second, elated his spirits accordingly.

“Faith, friend Cuthbert, thou art in luck’s way,” he muttered to himself; “thou mightst have hammered long enough at the forge ere thou hadst put a rose noble in thy pouch. I don’t half-like the duty I have undertaken, though,” he added, musingly; “it is but the lurcher’s part to dog these strangers. If I thought the stranger meant them falsely, I’d cast his gold into the Thames, and warn them of their danger.”

The words had scarcely passed his lips when the boat reached the landing place, and the pale, sickly lady, leaning on the arm of her attendant, and holding the child by the hand, made her appearance on the quay.

“Thank Heaven,” she exclaimed, “good Steadman, we are once more in England. ’Tis sweet to tread my native shores again, though I return to lay my bones there.”

“Pshaw!” said the blunt yeoman; “the air of England will bring back the rose of health into your cheek. I begin to feel the benefit already” he added; “I am as hungry as though I had not tasted food since we sailed from the Low Countries, where, God willing, would we had never been!”

The sigh of his lady, and her tearful glances at the garments of her widowhood, told him his wish was understood.

Cuthbert, who had been eying the party for some time, as if to assure himself that he was right in his surmise, hastily approached, and slapping the stout servitor on the back, saluted him by the name of “uncle.”

“Uncle!” repeated Steadman, suspiciously; “well, perhaps I am, for I have a springal of a nephew much about thy age; but since I am thine uncle, tell me my name. I have been so long absent in foreign parts that I have almost forgot the sound of it.”

“Why, Steadman, to be sure—Uncle Steadman,” replied the young man, with a smile whose frankness might have disarmed suspicion’s self; “the same who followed my mother’s noble foster-brother, the knight of Stanfield, to the wars, now ten years since; and who promised, the evening before his departure, to

take me with him; but, like most uncles when they promise, broke his word."

"Cuthbert, boy, give me your hand!" exclaimed the old soldier, now fully convinced of the identity of the speaker. "Blame thy mother's tears at the dread of parting with thee for my broken word, and bear me no ill-will. Is my sister living yet, or have thy scapegrace follies broke her heart?"

"Living; and, praise to my namesake, holy St. Cuthbert, well."

"Alone?" demanded her brother.

"Alone!" said the young man, with a look of surprise; "yes, quite alone, unless you choose to reckon me something in her household. But why these questions, uncle? Surely you cannot doubt a welcome from your sister's son?"

Steadman and his suffering mistress exchanged a few whispered words together; he was evidently urging something to which she yielded a reluctant assent.

"But may we trust him?" she demanded. "Remember what fearful perils still surround us."

"To be sure we may; he is the son of your late noble husband's foster-sister, and my nephew. He knows me well, though the stripling is so grown that I had well-nigh forgotten him. He knows, too, that I would brain him with as little remorse as I would set my heel upon a viper, should he prove treacherous."

"You may trust me, lady," said Cuthbert, taking off his cap and standing respectfully before her, for his young heart was touched by the sorrowful expression of her countenance, and the hand of death so evident upon it. "I am a thoughtless, gay fellow, too much addicted perhaps to shooting at the butts, wrestling, and quarter-staff; and when the cry of 'Clubs and 'prentices' is heard, am generally first upon the causeway; but I never yet broke confidence, or betrayed a fellow-creature in my life."

"Yes, marna, you may trust him," said the child, quietly; "his eyes do not shift and fall, and blink, as Robert's used to do; besides, he is Father Steadman's nephew, and must be faithful."

"Be it so!" sighed the lady. "Lead us, young man, to your mother's dwelling. Though poor in seeming, and hunted by my foes, I am not without the means of rewarding fidelity."

The speaker, exhausted with the effort to speak, immediately resumed the arm of her companion, and Cuthbert passed before to guide them on their way, revolving as he did so, what extraordinary scenes a child so young must have passed through to have been so precocious an observer of her fellow-creatures.

After winding their way through several of the narrow streets, the party emerged into Cheapside, and stopped at a small but substantial house, known by the sign of the Golden Sword, the lodge of Cuthbert's handicraft; such ensigns in the reign of Henry VIII. not being, as now, confined to hostels and wine-

houses, but common to all trades. Having assured himself, by careful observation, that they had not been followed, the young man led his guests through the well-furnished shop into a neat, low room at the back of the house, where his mother, Dame Maud, sat plying her needle, and waiting the return of her truant son. The greeting between Steadman and his sister was affectionate and sincere; he was many years her senior, and she looked upon him almost in the light of a parent as well as brother. No jar of worldly interests had ever passed between them, to lessen the bond of love. They had both been poor—sorrow had been their sole inheritance, and they had divided it ungrudgingly together. Nor was the widow of the good Sir Richard Stanfield and his orphan child made less welcome. Maud felt a grateful pride in being useful to her high-born guests, and as soon as the first words of welcome, surprise, and salutation were past, conducted the lady to her own quiet chamber, and entreated her to repose.

Whilst the hostess is thus hospitably engaged, it may be as well to enlighten our readers as to the circumstances under which the widow and infant heiress of a race for which, we flatter ourselves, they have long since felt a degree of interest, returned as fugitives to the land of their birth.

Calais still formed a portion of the English possessions in France; it was the key to the country—the door by which our armies could always enter, during the long and desperate wars which raged between us and our Gallic neighbours. The defence of the city and territory round it, known by the name of the March, was generally entrusted to a soldier of high repute; it being considered the most honourable as well as dangerous, post the crown could confer. The pride of the English nation, from the highest to the lowest, was gratified by the barren honour of this possession; and nothing perhaps tended to alienate the affections of her subjects from Mary so much as the ultimate loss of it. They could have pardoned her marriage with the Spaniard, the judicial murder of Lady Jane Grey, and the burning of the bishops; but the loss of Calais was a death-blow to her popularity. The people never forgave it; and the unhappy queen, when dying, frequently was heard to exclaim that Calais would be found engraven on her heart.

Sir Richard Stanfield, the last of his ancient race, nine years before the commencement of our tale, had espoused the only daughter of Walter de Mauny, deputy-governor of this so long-disputed city; and being of an adventurous disposition, easily yielded to the entreaties of his wife to remain in France, that she might not be separated from her father. A year after their marriage, their only child, Mary, was born. When Henry, in his war with Louis XII., yielded to the persuasion of the Emperor, and attacked Tournay, both Sir Richard and his father-in-law accom-

panied the chivalrous monarch in his expedition. The latter fell, full of age and honour, during the siege, in fighting by the side of his king, whose life he saved by the sacrifice of his own; for a party of Walloon Lansquenettiers having recognised the royal person, and surrounded it, the brave old knight kept them at bay till a party of English cavalry, in their turn, came up and rescued them—the monarch living and unharmed, his defender a corpse.

This act of devotion induced Henry, who was not then ungrateful, on the taking of the city a few days afterwards, to name Sir Richard Stanfield governor, much to the jealousy and anger of many who thought they had a better claim to such an honour; so true it is that kings seldom can reward one friend without creating a dozen enemies. Such always has been, and such, I suppose, always will be, the character of courtiers. During the knight's absence from England his estates were administered by his kinsman Sir John de Corbey, a proud, ambitious, disappointed man, whose fortune had been squandered in the wars in Italy, where he had been a partisan of the house of Medici in their aggressions upon the liberty of their country.

Sir Richard's conduct in his government secured him during five years not only the commendation of Henry, but what at that time was of far more consequence—the approbation of Wolsey. Still it was certain that he had some secret enemy. Several times, when out on a reconnoitring party, he had been shot at in a way which proved that the ball could only have come from one of his own men. Despite the entreaties of his wife, and the warning of his friends, all of whom attributed the attempts to the vengeance of some unsuccessful rival, he refused to resign his office, urging that it was one of honour as well as danger, and that, come what would, his enemies should never say they frightened him from the post his sovereign had confided to him.

This resolution, as chivalrous as rash, proved fatal. His body was one morning found upon the ramparts, where he had incautiously made his rounds without the attendance of his faithful esquire Steadman, pierced through the back by the blow of one of those long spears or partisans which sentinels use, evidently foully murdered by one of his own garrison. Strange as it may appear, the hatred of his enemies did not end here: scarcely were the funeral rites performed, than various suits were begun against his widow in the courts of equity and common law in the city, who found herself unexpectedly called upon to answer for bonds for moneys lent, of whose existence she had never dreamt, and whose validity she, anxious for the honour of her husband, as well as the inheritance of her child, unwisely contested. We say unwisely, because it was the contest of the lamb against the wolf—subtlety against unsuspecting frankness, fraud against honour. Had she at once proceeded to England, the machinations of her enemies could

not have pursued her so boldly there. Twice an attempt was made to destroy the house in which, with a few faithful domestics, she resided ; and more than one plot was frustrated for the abduction of her child. Worn out by the unequal and iniquitous contest, the widowed lady at last resolved to fly secretly to England, and trust to Henry's recollection of her father's services and death as a protection against the schemes which were evidently laid for her ruin. Gathering together her jewels and the remains of former wealth, she embarked at night in the small trading vessel whose arrival we have already noticed at the Tower quay, attended only by the faithful Steadman, whose love for his late master was now devoted to his helpless widow and his child.

"Humph !" exclaimed Cuthbert, as soon as his uncle had explained to him the melancholy story we have so briefly sketched. "And this kinsman—this Sir John de Corbey—did you never suspect ?"

"Frequently," whispered the old man ; "I know him well. He is a man whose windings are more difficult to trace than those of the venomous snake ; so secret are his movements, that not a trace remains to tell the serpent has been there. Besides, he is high in favour with the king ; and as we have no proof that he ever received my lady's letters, it would be dangerous as well as impolitic to accuse him."

"Perhaps not," said his nephew. "Tell me, what sort of a person is this Sir John ?"

"Tall ; dark hair ; a face cold as a marble statue, and, if I err not, a heart still colder ; he hath a scar on his left cheek, from the thrust of a lance, received at the siege of Pisa, in the Italian wars."

"It can't be he, then," muttered Cuthbert, musingly.

"He ! Whom ?"

"The man who gave me this golden noble to dog you on your arrival to your lodging," said the armourer, opening his hand and displaying the glittering coin ; "and who promised me the fellow if I brought him word of your whereabouts to St. Paul's Cross."

"This must be seen to," exclaimed the old man, thoughtfully. "Wouldst know the man again ?"

"From a hundred, with his deep-toned, earnest voice. The devil, when he tempted our grandmother Eve, was never half so persuasive ; he would have wiled a bird from the tree," added the speaker, "or an abbot from his dinner."

Steadman rose impatiently from off his stool, and paced the narrow chamber with an agitated step ; not that he doubted in the least his nephew's fidelity ; he would have answered with his life for that. Indeed, it seemed as if Providence had sent him especially to their assistance ; but he felt that an humble, uneducated being like himself was ill calculated to act in such important matters. He was like a child in a labyrinth, and saw no means of escape.

Cuthbert eyed him for some time in silence.

"Uncle," he at last observed, "for an old soldier who has battled in the Low Countries, you seem sadly puzzled with this tangled skein. Shall I unravel it?"

"How, boy, how? Tell that, for it is past my wits," replied the old man.

"Was not our lady one of the maids of honour to Queen Catherine?"

"True."

"And this Sir John de Corbey, if I mistake not, is a favourite with the chancellor Warham?"

"I have heard as much."

"Go to, then," resumed the armourer; "the game's not lost, play but the last cards boldly. The cardinal, whose stomach is of a singular capacity, e'en for a churchman's, longs for the great seal, and piously would miss his prayers to spite his brother prelate. The queen, whose goodness is as proverbial as Wolsey's appetite, will lend a helping hand. Why not claim her highness's protection?"

"I have thought of that before," answered Steadman; "but how to accomplish it?"

"Leave that to me. My godfather is her cofferer. I have free access to the palace; I'll place myself in the white gallery as she returns from vespers, and give it her myself; that is," added the young man, with a half-frown, for he liked not the doubtful expression of his uncle's countenance, "if you like to trust me."

"It is not that, boy—it is not that," said his uncle, replying more to the thought of his nephew than his words. "I would trust thee with my own life freely, without a word, a thought; but must consult my lady ere I take upon myself to act in this."

The old man passed up the narrow staircase to his sister's chamber, and in about an hour returned with the petition of his mistress to the queen, which the unhappy widow saw no other means of conveying to her hand than by the agency of Cuthbert.

"I bid thee be careful, boy—not faithful," he said, as he placed the packet in his hand; "the last I am sure thou'lt be. Double like a fox on thy return lest any watch thee. Thou hast to deal with subtle foes; be thou as subtle."

"Fear not for me," interrupted the armourer, at the same time secreting the packet in his bosom; "I know the City well; they must have a keen scent and a quick eye who chase me through its windings. I'd cross their trail, and throw the best bloodhound of them out ere they suspected that the game had doubled."

"Tis well," said his uncle, pleased with his confidence and zeal; "but beware of force."

"Force!" exclaimed his nephew, laughingly; "those who wield the sword can wield it, uncle. I have not been in the Low

Countries ; but I can turn a point and give a thrust with here and there a slasher. Ask my friends, else, of the City Watch," he added, with a knowing smile ; "most of them bear my mark."

Without waiting for any further reply, Cuthbert buckled on a light rapier, set his bonnet jauntily on one ear, and started on his errand.

That very evening, as Catherine passed from the chapel-royal with her train from vespers, Cuthbert, true to his promise, bent the knee before her.

This unhappy princess, then in the very bloom of womanhood, possessed much of the gravity as well as pride for which the Spanish nation were distinguished ; but, although haughty and reserved towards the nobles of her Court, who too often enticed her husband into follies which she disapproved, she was easy of access and affable to the poor. "They are God's children," she used to say when any wondered at her charities ; "He blesteth those who aid them."

As was the custom in all cases of petitions, when the presenter was not noble, one of her highness's attendants—a tall, stately nobleman, dressed in black, and wearing a Spanish order of knighthood—on a motion of Catherine's hand, advanced to take it ; but the armourer knew well the necessity, if possible, of interesting the queen herself—petitions so received being referred to the almoner to decide.

"Not to the almoner, gracious lady !" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes upon her with an imploring look ; "though my jerkin be of fustian, I am the messenger of one who is entitled to velvet and miniver in your grace's Court. There is a tale of sorrow to be told, of injury to be redressed, and none may come between your heart and you. As you hope," he added, "that our Lady will smile upon the prayer you uttered at her shrine this night, let your own eyes be judge of that I bring."

Catherine seemed struck by the earnestness as well as the simple eloquence of his words ; perhaps her own prayer had been that Henry's heart might be turned from its estrangement ; or, perhaps, with all a mother's love, she had asked for the health of her young child, the infant Mary, who alone survived of all the issue of her marriage-bed. Whatever was her secret motive, she determined to grant his prayer.

"Thou art a bold knave," she cried, extending her gloved hand to receive the packet, "to dictate in our very Court ; and we," she added, with a melancholy smile, probably at her own little superstition, "are as weak as thou art bold to yield to thy request. Let's see what mighty interests are at stake that a queen's eyes alone may read them."

Catherine retired to one of the lofty windows in the hall, and broke the seal of the packet. At first she seemed surprised, then

interested. Her eye glanced by turns from the missive to the bearer. Hastily tearing off the lower part of the letter, which probably contained the unfortunate lady of Stanfield's address, she placed the fragment in her bosom. She had lived so long in courts that she mistrusted all.

"Forgive our chiding," she said, advancing a step towards the still kneeling Cuthbert; "thou hast shown both zeal and prudence. Let them guide thee still."

These last words were accompanied by a look which plainly said, "There is danger—be upon your guard!"

The young man felt it as such; and he answered it by one of respectful determination and intelligence.

Most of her attendants were intrigued and curious at the nature of the communication her majesty had received; but respect and etiquette kept them silent.

"Has my lord of York yet gone from Court?" demanded Catherine, after a pause.

Ere those around her could reply, the great doors of the hall were thrown open, and Wolsey, who had been celebrating vespers in the chapel-royal, entered, preceded by the officers of his household, pages, and the usual procession of cross-bearers and priests. At any other moment, perhaps, Catherine would have resented his intrusion unannounced, for she was tenacious of her rank; but at the present instant she required his services. The cardinal, who deemed that she had long since reached her private apartments, excused himself with the courtly ease of a favourite. Placing the letter she had so lately received within his hands, Catherine watched his countenance with a searching glance whilst he perused it.

"What think you, my good lord?" she demanded, as the churchman raised his eyes from the paper.

"Does your highness feel interested in this?" was the reply.

"Deeply. She was one of my earliest friends in my adopted country," she answered. "I would set my life upon her truth."

"'Tis a vast pledge," exclaimed Wolsey with a bitter smile; "and you are happy, lady, that your heart can so trust, though it should be to be deceived. Was that youth," he added, pointing to Cuthbert, "the messenger?"

Catherine gravely bowed her head in affirmation, when the cardinal immediately beckoned him towards the window, where he was still standing with the queen.

In an instant the young man stood modestly before them.

"Thou hast performed thy message," said Wolsey, "faithfully; return to those who sent thee, and bid them wait with patience; justice, though slow of step, is sure. In thy way home," he added, "if but a shadow cross thy path, start from it as from an enemy. See that none follow thee. Give every man the crown of the

causeway ; and cross thyself, and tell thy beads to Heaven when thou reachest thy house in safety."

"Are her enemies so powerful, then ?" whispered the queen, as the young man disappeared at the lower end of the hall.

"The chancellor and his minion, Sir John de Corbey," replied his eminence ; "a man whose path 'tis dangerous to cross. Did I not see him when I entered ?"

"He hath left the presence," replied Catherine, glancing round the circle.

"Poor boy !" muttered the churchman with an imperceptible shrug, as he took leave of her highness ; "his wit must be keen and his arm strong if he reach home in safety."

On his way to York House the prelate meditated how best to turn the occasion to his advantage ; for, despite his great influence with Henry, the latter still retained a great esteem for Warham, who had been his father's chancellor as well as his own, and never could be persuaded to demand the great seal from him. The guilt of Sir John de Corbey, who was his kinsman as well as favourite, seemed admirably fitted for Wolsey's views ; since, could he involve the one in the discredit of the other, he might be either forced or driven into a resignation. Under any circumstances, he determined to protect with his powerful interest the widow of the knight of Stanfield ; if it served no other purpose, it would gratify the queen, and mortify his brother prelate and less ambitious rival."

Cuthbert had reached the banks of the Thames, intending to take boat to the city, when an arm was laid upon his shoulder, just as he was about to embark. He started beneath the pressure, mortified at his want of precaution. The fact is, his interview with Catherine and Wolsey had bewildered him. Turning, he saw by his side the nobleman who had so lately offered to take his petition to the queen.

"You pay little heed to the caution of his eminence," observed the stranger, with a quiet smile.

"Faith, my lord," answered Cuthbert, completely thrown off his guard by the encounter and apparent knowledge of Wolsey's whispered words, "I believe I have been dreaming ; but what is your good pleasure ?"

"Her highness has bethought her of your lady's suit, and thinks it better the widow of the knight of Stanfield should be under her protection than in her present retreat."

"And where may that be ?" demanded Cuthbert, eying him suspiciously.

"Where, I neither guess nor seek to know," replied the stranger, haughtily, but at the same time with an open frankness, which might have disarmed suspicion's self ; "but doubtless the messenger will be provided with a clue. I have but to conduct you to the house of her highness's master of the horse, and there my mission ends."

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